

Accompanying worship songs on the organ

JONATHAN ROBINSON & TOM BELL

WHY PLAY WORSHIP SONGS ON THE ORGAN?

We're sure you've noticed that the tables in *Sunday by Sunday* reflect a variety of church doctrines. Likewise, you'll have observed that when faith and circumstances intersect, not all composers of congregational music respond in the four-part vocal arrangements ideally suited to your long-practised organ skills. The background, training or outlook of the community for whom they're writing may not match that approach, and yet they may nevertheless be expressing something of quality that your fellowship needs to receive and echo just now; and not only because of the requirements of the lectionary.

In *The New Worship*, Barry Leisch argues persuasively from Acts 2 for the acceptability of a 'Pentecost of music styles'. If, he says, 'a multilingual approach for propagating the gospel is revealed as normative, then *multistylistic* music languages must necessarily follow as inevitable'. Explaining what she terms the 'worship voice' of a congregation in her recent book *The Music Architect*, Constance Cherry suggests that 'When we welcome the strangers that appear in our midst to stay, we must also welcome the way they expand our worship voice. This may require us to add songs to our musical repertoire so the songs of the community are truly reflective of the people God has gathered.' Venturing therefore into an unfamiliar area of your hymn book or *Sunday by Sunday* table column you may well find words (and attractive melody) to suit, but in a piano arrangement. If this was how the piece began its life then piano accompaniment may ideally complement its character, but sometimes it will actually be a transcription of a band original and is never going to work all that effectively with piano alone, lacking the 'weight' of sound and colour a well-resourced folk or soft-rock band can provide.

No band? Not necessarily a problem. If most of your congregation are unused to that kind of accompaniment it may actually introduce an unnecessary barrier to the reception of the new

text or tune. In fact Leisch's reading of Acts also leads him to the conclusion that 'local musical dialects should not be despised'. So, back to the organ, surely the greatest ever one-man band? Plenty of weight and colour here. Not all repertoire translates, but some is remarkably effective and the approach Tom Bell outlines below can help you build a bridge between churches (or even different services within one church).

Jonathan Robinson

FURTHER READING AND INFORMATION

To explore the techniques for creating an SATB arrangement in more detail, *Choral Arranging* by Hawley Ades (Shawnee Press, 1966) is comprehensive but approachable, with the first two chapters dealing with the basic techniques and their application to four-part writing.

Other piano arrangements that translate effectively to the organ include:

- 'I rejoiced when I heard them say' by Bernadette Farrell (AM 292, CH4 83, L 992, STF 26)
- 'Light of the world' by Tim Hughes (MP 1086, SOF 1419, STF 175)
- 'O church arise' by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty (MP 1213, SOF 1981, TS 2003)
- 'Who, O Lord, could save themselves' by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin (omit the bridge) (MP 1375, SOF 2658)

REFERENCES

- Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, Expanded edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001)
- Constance Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshippers in Song* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016)

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Many organists and choirs may find worship songs difficult to approach, and often with good reason. Fact is, they never seem so tightly and skilfully wrought as hymn tunes. In addition, worship songs are often awkward to play on the organ, and there may not be a great deal for the choir to do other than sing the tune. To some extent the problem is due to misunderstanding; a worship song won't sound much like *Abbot's Leigh* because it is not supposed to, and drawing a direct comparison between 'hymns' and 'songs' is a little like comparing Schubert Lieder to a Beatles album. Musically they are trying to achieve different things. When considering 'nuts and bolts', songs may be laid out poorly and impractically on the page, and are usually not conceived musically for organ or choir. Leaving aside questions of personal taste, we can begin to address these practical issues here. A worship song has been written with a vocal, not an instrumental, lead in mind. To support the worship leader as s/he sings, a band will improvise around the chord symbols provided. Thus nobody is playing from a score, and the arrangements we find in our hymn books are usually attempts to reproduce an improvisation on the printed page. With some exceptions, often these arrangements don't work on the organ and are difficult to learn. On the piano they might sound effective if played well (but they are still hard); on the organ they can be weak to say the least. What are we supposed to play with our feet: all those leaping arpeggios? My surmise is that for many organists, the sheer stress and hassle of trying to make worship songs work on the organ is itself enough to put them off thoroughly. Meanwhile, since I am quite happy to improvise, I vamp merrily away using the chord symbols provided, creating my very own bespoke accompaniment as I go. Alas, the advice 'just improvise' isn't hugely helpful to anyone who is neither a natural improviser nor schooled in formal harmony, so I propose an alternative approach.

REWRITING A WORSHIP SONG

Now this is going to seem a labour-intensive method, but it will save you a lot of bother in the long run. My idea here is to fashion an accompaniment to Steven Fry's 'Lift up your heads'. Contrary to what is usually printed in hymn books, the plan is to write an accompaniment that sounds genuinely idiomatic to the organ, is comfortable to play and provides a solid lead to the congregation. It will even furnish the choir with some harmonies to sing. Apply this method to a few songs over a number

of months, and the result is a file of manageable and effective accompaniments. (Yes, this is reliant on the hymns and songs being chosen in reasonable time!) Quite deliberately, I will keep to the chords marked in the printed score; if you feel confident enough to do so, by all means spice up the harmonies. What we are dealing with here are the basics of creating a workable (if workmanlike) arrangement of 'Lift up your heads'. Let us begin...

Example 1: 'Lift up your heads' (original)

The musical score for 'Lift up your heads' (original) is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Above the treble staff, chord symbols are provided for each measure. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 4/4. The first system includes chords: G (Ab), Bm (Cm), G (Ab), C (Db), D (Eb), C/D (Db/Eb), and D7 (Eb7). The second system includes: G (Ab), C (Db), G (Ab), Am7 (Bbm7), G (Ab), and C (Db). The third system includes: D (Eb), D7 (Eb7), G (Ab), Am7 (Bbm7), D7 (Eb7), and G (Ab). The score ends with 'etc.' in the bass staff.

1. Get the tune right! Not much of a challenge in this instance I admit, but often worship songs have syncopated melodies which can confuse the assembled faithful no end. It helps if the organist has the tune absolutely rhythmically accurate!
2. Now we can start work on the arrangement. Start with the bass line, and use the chord symbols provided in the original to help you. If these are unfamiliar, then here is a handy guide: 'Ab' means a chord of A flat major in root position, so your bass note will need to be Ab. 'Db' means 'a chord of D flat major in root position', so your bass note will need to be Db. 'Db/Eb' means 'a chord of Db over an Eb in the bass'. 'Cm' means 'C minor', 'Bbm7' is 'B flat minor 7th' and so on.

Example 2: interpreting chord symbols

The musical score for 'Example 2: interpreting chord symbols' is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Above the treble staff, chord symbols are provided for each measure. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 4/4. The first system includes chords: G (Ab), C (Db), C/D (Db/Eb), Bm (Cm), and Am7 (Bbm7). The second system includes: G (Ab), C (Db), C/D (Db/Eb), Bm (Cm), and Am7 (Bbm7). The score ends with 'etc.' in the bass staff.

Example 3: organ arrangement

Individual chords tend to stick around longer in songs than in hymns, so consider repeated bass notes here and there to keep propelling things forward (e.g. bars 3 and 6); remember that often worship songs are conceived with a drummer and a bass guitarist in mind and thus should rarely sound ‘static’ even if the same chord sits beneath the melody for several bars. The resultant strong sense of pulse will (hopefully!) make any off-beat rhythms in the melody easier to deal with. Remember always to think vocally too: in general stepping down a tone sounds nicer and is easier to sing than pole-vaulting upwards by a seventh. Two final tips here: contrary motion between soprano and bass can sound effective; and avoid parallel fifths and octaves (they sound weak). You will notice I use a B \flat in the bass line in bar 2, despite the chord symbol saying nothing of the sort. It sounds nice, though; I borrowed it from the ‘alto’ part in the original, and it certainly pays to keep one’s eyes and ears peeled in this way when rearranging songs. Now road test your arrangement by playing tune and bass together. If something sounds amiss, check through the pointers above again.

3. So, on to the tenor and alto parts: again, use the given chords as a guide (so ‘D \flat ’ gives you a choice of D \flat , F or A \flat for your inner voices). There are a couple of important considerations here: by and large avoid using the third of the chord if it is already in the melody (in the case of ‘D \flat ’, this would be F). Try to space the parts nicely to avoid a hollow sound (don’t allow the gaps between soprano and alto, and between alto and tenor, to exceed an octave). As with the bass line, make sure you don’t create any parallel fifths or octaves between the voices, and remember that in writing something ‘singer friendly’ you will also create an arrangement suitable for the organ. If in doubt, consider what a traditional hymn looks like and compare that to your work.

You might also like to take a peek at some recent hymn collections such as the latest Methodist hymnal, *Singing the Faith*, where the compilers have taken a similar approach to that above in addressing many of the most popular worship songs. Hopefully in this short piece I have outlined a constructive approach with clarity. I should stress that getting this stuff right is something requiring practice, so don’t be disheartened if your first attempts disappoint you. Use your ears, and persevere! Over time, you will amass a library of nice arrangements of all the regular songs which crop up at your church.
Tom Bell

Tom Bell’s contribution to this article has been adapted from a version originally published in Organists’ Review in 2014.

*‘Lift up your heads’ words and music by Steven L. Fry
© 1974 Birdwing Music/Capitol CMG Genesis (Adm
capitolcmgpublishing.com UK & Eire Song Solutions www.
songsolutions.org). All rights reserved. Used by permission.*

‘Lift up your heads’ is suitable as a general praise song for many occasions. In this issue, we list the song for the Transfiguration on page 26.

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